

# Filigree Ball

By ANNA KATHARINE GREEN,

Author of "The Mystery of Agatha Webb," "Lost Man's Lane," Etc.

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Did this argue a natural expectation on her part of resuming her hat, or was the action the result of an unconscious habit?

Having thus noted all that was possible concerning her without infringing on the rights of the coroner, I next proceeded to cast about for clues to the identity of the person whom I considered responsible for the extinguished candle. But here a great disappointment awaited me. I could find nothing expressive of a second person's presence save a pile of cigar ashes scattered near the legs of a common kitchen chair which stood face to face with the bookshelves in that part of the room where the candelabrum rested on a small table. But these ashes looked old, nor could I detect any evidence of tobacco smoke in the general mustiness pervading the place. Was the

man who died here a fortnight since

accountable for these ashes? If so, his unfinished cigar must be within sight. Should I search for it? No, for this would take me to the hearth and that was quite too deadly a place to be heedlessly approached.

Besides, I was not yet finished with the spot where I then stood. If I could gather nothing satisfactory from the ashes, perhaps I could from the chair or the shelves before which it had been placed. Some one with an interest in books had sat there; some one who expected to spend sufficient time over these old tomes to feel the need of a chair. Had this interest been a general one, or had it centered in a particular volume? I ran my eye over the shelves within reach, possibly with an idea of settling this question, and though my knowledge of books is limited I could see that these were what one might call rarities. Some of them contained specimens of black letter, all moldy and smothered in dust; in others I saw dates of publication which placed them among volumes dear to a collector's heart. But none of them, so far as I could see, gave any evidence of having been lately handled; and, anxious to waste no time on queries, I hastily quitted my chair and was proceeding to turn my attention elsewhere when I noticed on an upper shelf a book projecting slightly beyond the others. Instantly my foot was on the chair and the book in my hand. "1941 I find it of interest? Yes, but not on account of its contents, for they were pure Greek to me, but because it lacked the dust on its upper edge which had marked every other volume I had handled. This, then, was what had attracted the unknown to these shelves, this—let me see if I can remember its title—"Disquisition Upon Old Coast Lines." Pshaw! I was wasting my time. What had such a dry compendium as this to do with the body lying in its blood a few steps behind me, or with the hand which had put out the candle upon this dreadful deed? Nothing. I replaced the book, but not so hastily as to push it one inch beyond the position in which I found it. For, if it had a tale to tell, then was it my business to leave that tale to be read by those who understood books better than I did.

My next move was toward the little table holding the candelabrum with the glittering pendants. This table was one of a nest standing against a nearby wall. Investigation proved that it had been lifted from the others and brought to its present position within a very short space of time, for the dust lying thick on its top was almost entirely lacking from the one which had been nested under it. Neither had the candelabrum been standing there long, dust being found under as well as around it. Had her hand brought it there? Hardly, if it came from the top of the mantel toward which I now turned in my course of investigation.

I have already mentioned this mantel more than once. This I could hardly avoid, since in and about it lay the heart of the mystery for which the room was remarkable. But, though I have thus freely spoken of it and though it was not absent from my thoughts for a moment, I had not ventured to approach it beyond a certain safe radius. Now in looking to see if I might not lessen this radius I experienced that sudden and overwhelming interest in its every feature which attaches to all objects peculiarly associated with danger.

I even took a step toward it, holding up my lamp so that a stray ray struck the faded surface of an old engraving hanging over the fireplace. It was the well known one, in Washington at least, of Benjamin Franklin at the court of France, interesting, no doubt, in a general way, but scarcely calculated to hold the eye at so critical an instant. Neither did the shelf below call for more than momentary attention, for it was absolutely bare. So was the time worn, if not blood stained, hearth, save for the impenetrable shadow cast over it by the huge bulk of the great settle standing at its edge.

I have already described the impression made on me at my first entrance by this ancient and characteristic article of furniture.

It was intensified now as my eye ran over the chimney carving which added to the discomfort of its high, straight back and as I smelled the smell of its moldy and possibly mouse haunted cushions. A crawling sense of dread took the place of my first instinctive repugnance, not because superstition had as yet laid its grip upon me, although the place, the hour and the near and veritable presence of death were enough to rouse the imagination past the bounds of the actual, but because of a discovery I had made—a discovery which emphasized the tradition that all who had been found dead under the mantel had fallen as if from the end of this monstrous and patriarchal bench. Do you ask what this discovery was? It can be told in a word. This one

end and only this end had been made comfortable for the sitter. For a space scarcely wide enough for one the seat and back at this special point had been upholstered with leather, fastened to the wood with heavy wrought nails. The remaining portion stretched out bare, hard and impressively forbidding to one who sought ease there or even a moment of casual rest.

The natural inference was that the owner of this quaint piece of furniture had been a very selfish man who thought only of his own comfort. But might he not have had some other reason for his apparent selfishness? As I asked myself this question and noted how the long and embracing arm which guarded this cushioned retreat was fastened on top for the convenient holding of decanter and glass, feelings to which I can give no name and which I had fondly believed myself proof against began to take the place of judgment and reason. Before I realized the nature of my own impulse or to what it was driving me I found myself moving slowly and steadily toward this formidable seat under an irresistible desire to fling myself down upon these old cushions and—

But here the creaking of some faroff shutter, possibly the one I had seen swaying from the opposite side of the street, recalled me to the duties of the hour, and, remembering that my investigations were but half completed and that I might be interrupted any moment by detectives from headquarters, I broke from the accursed charm, which horrified me the moment I escaped it, and, quitting the room by a door at the further end, sought to find in some of the adjacent rooms the definite traces I had failed to discover on this actual scene of the crime.

It was a dismal search, revealing at every turn the almost maddened haste with which the house had been abandoned. I rushed out into the kitchen and so on by a close and narrow passage to the negro quarters clustered in the rear. Here I made a discovery. One of the windows in this long disused portion of the house was not only unlocked, but partly open. But, as I came upon no marks showing that this outlet had been used by the escaping murderer, I made my way back to the

front of the house and thus to the stairs communicating with the upper floor.

It was on the rug lying at the foot of these stairs that I came upon the first of a dozen or more burned matches which lay in a distinct trail up the staircase and along the floors of the upper halls. As these matches were all burned as short as fingers could hold them, it was evident that they had been used to light the steps of some one seeking refuge above, possibly in the very room where we had seen the light which had first drawn us to this house. How then? Should I proceed, or await the coming of the "boys" before pushing in upon a possible murderer? I decided to proceed, fascinated, I think, by the silecy of the trail which lay before me.

But when after a careful following in the steps of him who had so lately preceded me I came upon a tightly closed door at the end of a side passage, I gave a slight push to the door and, on seeing a crack of light leap into life along the jamb, pushed the door wider and wider till the whole room stood revealed.

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Not satisfied with this short survey, I turned my attention to my surroundings, which had many points of interest. Foremost among these was the big four poster which occupied a large space at my right. I had never seen its like in use before, and I was greatly attracted by its size and the air of mystery imparted to it by its closely drawn curtains of faded brocade.

A dressing table laden with woman's fixings and various articles of the toilet, all of an unexpected value and richness, occupied the space between the two windows, and on the floor, immediately in front of a high mahogany mantel, there lay, amid a number of empty boxes, an overturned chair. This chair and the conjectures its position awakened led me to look up at the mantel, with which it seemed to be in some way connected, and thus I became aware of a wasp old drawing hanging on the wall above it. Why this picture, which was a totally uninteresting sketch of a slumbering girl face, should have held my eye after the first glance I cannot say even now. It had no beauty, even of the sentimental kind, and very little if any meaning. Its lines, weak at the best, were nearly obliterated and in some places quite faded out, yet I not only paused to look at it, but in looking at it forgot myself and well nigh my errand. Yet there was no apparent reason for the spell it exerted over me.

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That it really was the wedding bouquet and that this was the room in which the bride had dressed for the ceremony was apparent to the most casual observer. But it became an established fact when in my further course about the room I chanced on a handkerchief with the name Veronica embroidered in one corner.

This handkerchief had an interest apart from the name on it. It was of dainty texture and quite in keeping so far as value went with the other belongings of its fastidious owner. But it was not clean. Indeed it was strangely soiled, and this soil was of a nature I did not readily understand. A woman would doubtless have comprehended immediately the cause of the brown streaks I found on it, but it took me several minutes to realize that this bit of cambric, delicate as a cobweb, had been used to remove dust. To remove dust! Dust from what? From the mantelpiece probably, upon one end of which I found it. But no! One look along the polished boards convinced me that whatever else had been dusted in this room this shawl had not. The accumulation of days if not of months was visible from one end to the other of its unrelieved surface save where the handkerchief had laid, and—the greatest discovery yet—where five clear spots just to the left of the center showed where some man's finger tips had rested. Nothing but the pressure of finger tips could have caused just the appearance presented by these spots. By scrutinizing them closely I could even tell where the thumb had rested and at once forebaw the possibility of determining by which lay in a distinct trail up the staircase and along the floors of the upper halls. As these matches were all burned as short as fingers could hold them, it was evident that they had been used to light the steps of some one seeking refuge above, possibly in the very room where we had seen the light which had first drawn us to this house. How then? Should I proceed, or await the coming of the "boys" before pushing in upon a possible murderer? I decided to proceed, fascinated, I think, by the silecy of the trail which lay before me.

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Interesting as was this find, it was followed by one still more so. Nested in the folds of the cloak lay the withered remains of what could only have been the bridal bouquet. Unmistakenly now and unhesitatingly, it was once a beautiful specimen of the florist's art. As I noted how the main bunch of roses and lilies was connected by long satin ribbons to the lesser clusters which hung from it I recalled with conceivable horror the use to which a similar ribbon had been put in the room below. In the shudder called up by this coincidence I forgot to speculate how a bouquet carried by the bride could have found its way back to this upstairs room when, as all accounts agree, she had fled from the parlor below without speaking or staying foot the moment she was told of the catastrophe which had taken place in the library. That her wrap should be lying here was not strange, but that the wedding bouquet—

That it really was the wedding bouquet and that this was the room in which the bride had dressed for the ceremony was apparent to the most casual observer. But it became an established fact when in my further course about the room I chanced on a handkerchief with the name Veronica embroidered in one corner.

This handkerchief had an interest apart from the name on it. It was of dainty texture and quite in keeping so far as value went with the other belongings of its fastidious owner. But it was not clean. Indeed it was strangely soiled, and this soil was of a nature I did not readily understand. A woman would doubtless have comprehended immediately the cause of the brown streaks I found on it, but it took me several minutes to realize that this bit of cambric, delicate as a cobweb, had been used to remove dust. To remove dust! Dust from what? From the mantelpiece probably, upon one end of which I found it. But no! One look along the polished boards convinced me that whatever else had been dusted in this room this shawl had not. The accumulation of days if not of months was visible from one end to the other of its unrelieved surface save where the handkerchief had laid, and—the greatest discovery yet—where five clear spots just to the left of the center showed where some man's finger tips had rested. Nothing but the pressure of finger tips could have caused just the appearance presented by these spots. By scrutinizing them closely I could even tell where the thumb had rested and at once forebaw the possibility of determining by which lay in a distinct trail up the staircase and along the floors of the upper halls. As these matches were all burned as short as fingers could hold them, it was evident that they had been used to light the steps of some one seeking refuge above, possibly in the very room where we had seen the light which had first drawn us to this house. How then? Should I proceed, or await the coming of the "boys" before pushing in upon a possible murderer? I decided to proceed, fascinated, I think, by the silecy of the trail which lay before me.

But when after a careful following in the steps of him who had so lately preceded me I came upon a tightly closed door at the end of a side passage, I gave a slight push to the door and, on seeing a crack of light leap into life along the jamb, pushed the door wider and wider till the whole room stood revealed.

The instantaneous bringing of a shutter in one of its windows proved the room to be the very one which we had seen lighted from below. Otherwise all was still, nor was I able to detect in my first hurried glance any other token of human presence than a candle sputtering in its own grease at the bottom of a tumbler placed on one corner of an old fashioned dressing table. This, the one touch of incongruity in a room otherwise rich if not stately in its appointments, was loud in its suggestion of some hidden presence given to expedients and reckless of consequences, but of this presence nothing was to be seen.

Not satisfied with this short survey, I turned my attention to my surroundings, which had many points of interest. Foremost among these was the big four poster which occupied a large space at my right. I had never seen its like in use before, and I was greatly attracted by its size and the air of mystery imparted to it by its closely drawn curtains of faded brocade.

A dressing table laden with woman's fixings and various articles of the toilet, all of an unexpected value and richness, occupied the space between the two windows, and on the floor, immediately in front of a high mahogany mantel, there lay, amid a number of empty boxes, an overturned chair. This chair and the conjectures its position awakened led me to look up at the mantel, with which it seemed to be in some way connected, and thus I became aware of a wasp old drawing hanging on the wall above it. Why this picture, which was a totally uninteresting sketch of a slumbering girl face, should have held my eye after the first glance I cannot say even now. It had no beauty, even of the sentimental kind, and very little if any meaning. Its lines, weak at the best, were nearly obliterated and in some places quite faded out, yet I not only paused to look at it, but in looking at it forgot myself and well nigh my errand. Yet there was no apparent reason for the spell it exerted over me.

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